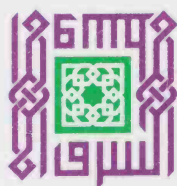


IMAM ABU HAMID GHAZALI

AN EXPONENT OF ISLAM IN ITS TOTALITY



A LECTURE BY
Hamid Algar

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Imam Abu Hamid **GHAZALI**

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Imam Abu Hamid Ghazali



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When examining the intellectual and spiritual history of Islam, or for that matter any other major human community, to speak of great figures or important individuals carries with it a danger of distortion, for the maintenance and perpetuation of a religious or cultural tradition is clearly dependent on more than the efforts of individuals. There is something arbitrary and artificial in classifying the scholars of the past as either great, first-ranking figures, or as persons of lesser importance. Very frequently in the evaluation of our history we fall prey to the problems that are inherent in this scheme of things, leading us to say that after a certain time



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in our history no great figures emerged. This is simply because according to our conventional historiography no important names in a given field emerged after a certain date. Furthermore, the history of a given civilization, culture or tradition is necessarily the history of its totality, not simply of a few individuals contributing to it. This having been said, it remains indisputable that there are in the history of every community certain individuals who played a role, which while not indispensable, was nonetheless qualitatively and quantitatively more important than that of their predecessors or those who came after them.

It may be in this sense that we can interpret the well known *hadith* ascribed to the Prophet (saw) in which he is reported to have spoken of the emergence of a *mujaddid*, a renewer, who will come at the beginning of every century of the Islamic era. Not one who will reform religion, which by definition does not need reforming, but rather one who will renew it by restating, elaborating, and exemplifying its essential principles with new force and vigor. It might be profitable to



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explore the history of Islam with a view to discovering those who in each century of the Islamic era fulfilled this function of *tajdid*, of renewal. In many centuries it would be difficult or at least controversial to identify a single individual as having been the *mujaddid*, for the function of *tajdid* may have been shared by several individuals. There are, however, certain individuals whom tradition with near-unanimity identifies as having been the *mujaddidin* of their respective centuries. By the amplitude and profundity of their work and their influence they indeed gave a new impetus to the spiritual and intellectual life of the community, not simply for their own century but for many centuries afterwards. Certainly one such individual is Imam Abu Hamid Ghazali, the subject of this lecture.

In the evaluation of Ghazali some people have in fact gone so far as to say that he is the greatest of all authorities on Islam after the Prophet himself. We may lay aside such exaggerations, but there is no doubt that he is one of the major figures in the Islamic tradition; it is fair to say that



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he exemplifies or personifies the codification of the Sunni Islamic tradition in its classical form. This may sound like a pedantic definition but its meaning and justification will, I hope, become apparent.

These days in the West it is conventional, not to say fashionable, to avoid the simple rehearsal of biographic data when attempting to assess the career of a given individual. But it has to be said that with respect to traditional Muslim scholars such as Ghazali, there is such a close interconnection between life and work that to establish a chronological framework for the life of the individual in question is indispensable. From the outward events of the life of Ghazali we can deduce a pattern of spiritual development which is necessarily reflected in his written works, his main legacy to the Islamic *umma*.

So let us begin without apology in our own conventional fashion by enumerating the facts and the dates of his life. Imam Abu Hamid Ghazali was born near the town of Tus in Khurasan in 450/1058. Khurasan is in terms of



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present day geography simply the most easterly region of Iran bounded by Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. In its traditional extent, however, Khurasan was considerably broader and included areas contiguous to present day Iran that are now included in those two countries. In general it can be said that it was one of the most fertile and creative regions that gave to Islam many of its most important scholars, mystics and institutions. The fact that Ghazali came from this region may, then, not be coincidental. As for his native city of Tus, it is today simply a ruin on the outskirts of the far larger city of Mashhad. It was one of those many cities in Khurasan that were devastated by the Mongol incursions of the seventh/thirteenth century and never fully recovered. About the only monument of note that is to be found in Tus today, apart from the grave of the poet Firdausi, is that of Imam Ghazali who was undoubtedly the greatest son of Tus. He was orphaned shortly after his birth and grew up largely under the tutelage of a friend of his father who appears to have been a practicing Sufi; this person was also



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responsible for the early training of his younger brother, Ahmad Ghazali.

Ahmad Ghazali has also entered the history of Islamic culture, most specifically Sufism, as an important figure. But there is a very clear typological distinction between the two Ghazalis, Abu Hamid and Ahmad. Although, as we shall see, Sufism is an important ingredient in the persona of Abu Hamid Ghazali and his scholarly writings, it was one which was set in a certain context; it was not the sole or even the dominant element in his religious outlook. By contrast one can classify Ahmad Ghazali more simply as a Sufi.

So Ghazali, like the Prophet (s.a.w.s.), tasted orphanhood in his childhood and grew up under the tutelage of a family friend. Very soon, it appears, he manifested signs of unusual intellectual distinction as is commonly the case with many of the important figures in the history of Islam. He memorized the text of the Quran at an extremely early age, as well as the other texts that formed the basis of a primary education in that period; his first formal instructor was Ahmad Radkani.



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From Tus he moved to the city of Jurjan, which in terms of present day geography is the city of Gunbad-i Qabus in Iran, in order to begin his more formal religious instruction at a higher level, that of the *madrassa*. From there in turn, in around 471/1077, when he was a little more than twenty years of age, he moved to Nishapur, the principal city in the entirety of Khurasan.

Nishapur, which also was to be devastated and destroyed by the Mongols, recovered somewhat more fully than did Tus; it was nonetheless never able to recapture its previous significance as a major center of trade, commerce, art, architecture, and, above all, religious learning. It was in Nishapur that the young Ghazali made the acquaintance of two figures who were to dominate his early intellectual development, the great theologian Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni, and the leading Sufi, Abu Ali Farmadi. Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni was above all an exponent of the Ash`ari school of *kalam*. (By *kalam* we mean what is commonly translated as theology,



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i.e. the coherent statement in rationally defensible form of the essential dogmas of the Islamic faith).

Ghazali had among his many other distinguishing qualities the ability to master the entirety of the religious curriculum as taught in the *madrasas* at that time, and soon he became the foremost pupil of Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni. At the very same time, he also had relations with the Sufi Farmadi, who had been the teacher in mysticism of his younger brother Ahmad Ghazali. Farmadi is to be found in the initiatic lines of many of the Sufi *tariqas*, including, for example, the Naqshbandi *tariqa*. But at this point Ghazali's interest in Sufism was not so all-consuming as to make of him a fully fledged disciple or initiate of Farmadi. It seems simply that the element of Sufism in his own practice and understanding of Islam, first obtained from his guardian in childhood, was somewhat advanced and intensified now by his contacts with al-Farmadi. At this point, his main interests were still clearly intellectual and theoretical, and he was closer to Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni than he was to Farmadi.



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In the year 478/1085 Imam al-Haramayn Juwayni passed away; Farmadi had passed away the year before. But Ghazali also had a third and important affiliation in Nishapur, with the minister of the Seljuq state Nizam al-Mulk, whose name is associated above all with the spread of the *madrasa* system in what we can anachronistically call Iran. The *madrasa* system had first originated in Khurasan and then under the auspices of Nizam al-Mulk and others gradually spread farther west in Iran and then expanded into the Arab lands.

Nizam al-Mulk appreciated the scholarly capacities of Ghazali and soon enabled him to obtain in his own right an appointment at the Nishapur *madrasa*. The crowning moment for al-Ghazali in his scholarly career came in the year 484/1091 when he was appointed at the Nizamiya *madrasa* in Baghdad. (Note that the *madrasa* is named Nizamiya after the founding individual Nizam al-Mulk).

The appointment of Ghazali at a relatively early age to teach at the Nizamiya of Baghdad was



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to teach Ash'ari *kalam* which appears to have been his immediate focus of interest at the time. But we know that he was also intent on the cultivation of *fiqh*, of Islamic jurisprudence, and that he was additionally studying philosophy. As far as *fiqh* is concerned, this does not call for any comment. *Fiqh* had from the very outset been one of the principal subjects taught in the *madrasa*; in fact, the elaboration of *fiqh* went together with the development of the *madrasas*, each *madrasa* generally being restricted to or even established on behalf of a single *madhhab*. Therefore, it is not surprising to find that Ghazali, as one indication of his general versatility, compiled three separate handbooks, of varying length and complexity, on the Shafi'i *madhhab* in this period.

His interest in philosophy is perhaps rather more unexpected, in that philosophy (i.e. the legacy of Greek philosophical thought translated into Arabic) was cultivated outside the bounds of the *madrasa* system. For this there are a large number of reasons, above all the fact that what was taught within the *madrasa* had as its material,



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object, and source of authority, the revelation enshrined in the Qur'an and the Sunna, whereas the Greek philosophical legacy, whatever else might be said in its favor, lacked such foundations and rested on a world-view alien to that of the *madrasa*.

Nonetheless, philosophical ideas were much in the air and it can be said that some of the methods of logical argumentation inherent to Greek philosophy had made their way into the Islamic religious sciences, especially *kalam*, the rational theology expounded by the Ash'ari school, and even into the methodology of *fiqh*. And Ghazali himself clearly was attracted by the subject, not necessarily as a potential or actual adherent, but as one who recognized it to be a subject of importance deserving study. During his years in Baghdad we find him writing two books on philosophy. The first of them is a simple exposition of the principal doctrines of the Greek philosophers and their Muslim pupils. (By "pupils" of course we do not mean direct study but study by means of texts). This book was entitled *Maqasid*



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al-Falasifa, the “aims of the philosophers.” It seems that the purpose of Ghazali in writing this book, in which he expounds in an entirely neutral fashion the doctrines of the philosophers, was to establish his own credentials as one learned in philosophy. It happened, however, that this book was translated into Latin in the early Middle Ages and made its way from Muslim Spain to Europe, acquiring for Ghazali the reputation of being a Muslim philosopher following the Hellenistic model.

In point of fact, however, it appears that for Ghazali the writing of this book was simply a prelude to the work that he wrote in refutation of the philosophers, a work called *Tabafut al-Falasifa*, which we may translate either as the “collapse of the philosophers”, i.e. the collapse of their positions through internal inconsistency or illogicality, or the “refutation of the philosophers.” In any event the upshot is the same.

Later, when discussing Ghazali’s attitude to the intellectual currents of his age we will take a closer look at the contents of the book. What is



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interesting is that from within the *madrasa*, and at a relatively early age, Ghazali was taking an interest in philosophy. Even though hostile, this interest was an indication of the breadth of his intellectual range.

In 488/1095, roughly four years after his arrival in Baghdad, at the very height of his fame and popularity as a teacher, as well as his productivity in terms of the works that we have just discussed, Ghazali began to undergo a spiritual and intellectual crisis. He began to question his own motives in teaching at the *madrasa*. He suspected himself of teaching for motives of fame, of celebrity, of gaining applause and approbation. Together with this moral self-scrutiny, he began to experience doubts concerning the certainty of his own religious knowledge. It is important to note that if we speak here of a "spiritual crisis" occurring in Ghazali, we should not anachronistically attribute to him a crisis of belief as might happen to a nineteenth- or a twentieth-century man, assailed by fundamental doubts concerning the validity of religion as such. It appears rather that



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for Ghazali what was important was to obtain absolute certainty concerning the mode and content of belief. In other words, it is not that he veered away at any time from the fundamental doctrines of *tauhid* and *nubuwwa*, the unity of Allah and prophethood. It is that among the competing interpretations of Islam he was no longer satisfied with a mere intellectual mastery and insisted on finding a path which would lead to a direct experiential verification for his own self of the truth of religion. Moral doubts about the purity of his motivation, combined with the pressing spiritual need for an immediate perception of reality to verify the truth of belief, occasioned a profound crisis in Ghazali. The most visible consequence of this crisis was an inability to continue teaching.

For it appears, according to Ghazali's own account, that this inability was physical as well as spiritual. He therefore quit Baghdad and his teaching position. It has been suggested that at least a contributory reason might have been a change of power at this time. A new Seljuq sultan, Berkiyaruq, with whom Ghazali was not on close



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terms, had now come to power, but at the very most this could have only been a background factor. There is no reason to doubt the authenticity of the crisis undergone by Ghazali which has moreover its counterpart in the lives of numerous other individuals.

One of the important aspects of the life of Ghazali is that he exemplifies a frequent, almost normative, process: First a firm grounding is acquired in the essential religious sciences, *tafsir*, *hadith*, *kalam*, *fiqh*. Then however the mastery of this material, acquired simply for purposes of erudition, no longer proves satisfactory. A deeper inner need is felt which leads the individual in question to turn his back on his previous pursuits in order not to abandon but to transcend the formal knowledge that he has acquired. This shows itself outwardly in the abandonment of the *madrassa*, as happened also in the case of Jalal al-Din Rumi. With him, the change in direction was the result not of a crisis which gradually came to a head but of the sudden irruption into his life of the individual known as Shams Tabrizi who came



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to him one day when he was teaching and by various means indicated to him the limitations of purely scholastic learning.

So we see here not simply an event in the personal biography of Ghazali but the exemplification of a pattern found with many important individuals who after becoming firmly grounded in the religious sciences turned in the direction of Sufism. This is precisely where Ghazali now turns. After making provision for his family he disappears from Baghdad on the announced pretext of making the Hajj which is a fact also of some inward significance. But instead of proceeding immediately to Mecca he went first across the Syrian desert to Damascus where he spent a considerable time in meditation in the base of one of the minarets of the Umayyad Mosque. From there he proceeded to al-Quds (Jerusalem) or more precisely to the Masjid al-Aqsa where again he spent a considerable time in solitary meditation, the results of which are very probably contained in a book called *Ma'arij al-Quds*, the "Ascent of Jerusalem." "Very probably," because



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doubts have been raised about the attribution of this book to Ghazali. From Masjid al-Aqsa he traveled southward to al-Khalil (Hebron) and spent time in meditation at the tomb of Ibrahim al-Khalil (as) before finally going on the Hajj.

Thereafter, his movements are not certain. It seems that he was sighted back in Baghdad in 490/1097, about two years after his first departure. But other than his stops in Damascus, al-Quds, al-Khalil, and the Hajj, where he was during this period, and with whom if anyone he was in contact, we do not know. What can be said with some confidence is that this was a period of intense devotion and meditation, of fargoing involvement in Sufism.

An important feature of Sufism in most cases, although by no means all, is that the aspirant attaches himself to a teacher who will convey to him in a fashion that can only be done by a living human being and not by a book, the real substance of *tasawwuf* as inherited ultimately from the Prophet (s.a.w.s). Whether Ghazali acquired such a teacher during his period of absence from



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Baghdad is unknown. Certainly he does not refer to any one individual as his teacher in any of his works. Nor do we find in the biographies of the leading Sufis of his era any mention of al-Ghazali as having been their disciple. This association with Farmadi while in Nishapur does not really count as an initiatic relationship between disciple and master. Very probably Ghazali was among those rare Sufis who had a valid and comprehensive entry onto the path without the benefit of a living human master. In other words, he was among those whom we may classify as *uwaysi*.

The *uwaysi* Sufis are those whose initiation into *tasawwuf* is directly by means of the spiritual personality of the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) perceived either in a dream or a vision or by means of a Sufi of earlier times who has departed the physical plane. This is speculative, since Ghazali never refers to himself as *uwaysi* or reports seeing the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) in a dream. But given the extreme sobriety of Ghazali and his abstention from obtruding his spiritual experiences on the reader,



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the possibility of his having been an *uwaysi* cannot be excluded.

So after a period in which he turned towards the Sufi path, with or without a living human preceptor, we find Ghazali back in Baghdad in 490/1097. Not long after he returned to his birth place of Tus and took up anew his teaching function, most probably at the request of those who were acquainted with his fame. In 499/1106 he returned to Nishapur to resume formal teaching at its *madrasa*, now by invitation and in fact at the insistence of its authorities. According to his own testimony, the fact that the sixth century of the Islamic era was about to begin was also persuasive; he interpreted this as an indication that by returning to Nishapur he would be crowning his work as *mujaddid*. His stay in Nishapur was not, however, prolonged. He returned to Tus where he died in 508/1111.

Before turning to the writings of Ghazali which constitute his main legacy, let us look once more at the pattern of his life. The pattern begins



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with the mastery of the intellectual and religious sciences of the day, supplanted by a period of withdrawal and isolation, of immersion in spiritual and devotional practice. But the pattern is not yet complete. It is brought to an end only with a return to teaching activity and social involvement. This represents an ideal and almost normative life pattern for a religious scholar in Islam. First comes the necessary acquisition of knowledge, of the knowledge contained in books and taught by recognized authorities in a proper place, i.e. in the *madrasa*. Then comes a period of spiritual devotion which is inevitably accompanied by social withdrawal. Then, however, since it is the duty of the Muslim scholar not simply to indulge himself in an endless process of individual self-purification, comes the return to involvement in society. Without in any way intending a detailed personal comparison we could compare this threefold journey to the Mi'raj of the Prophet (s.a.w.s.), in that the Prophet left behind temporarily the physical plane, that of immersion and intense involvement in the affairs of the *umma*,



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for the Mi'raj; he went to the divine presence and then returned from it in order to resume his mission. There is something which corresponds or is analogous to the Mi'raj—without in any way reproducing it since it is a miracle exclusive to the Prophet—in the lives of many of the great figures in the history of Islam. This analogue involves a temporary withdrawal from the pattern of teaching and social involvement, in order to attain a greater proximity to Allah and a comprehensive immersion in the realities proclaimed by Islam, not as an aim in itself but on the contrary as a preliminary to a return to ever more fruitful activity within Islamic society.

Now the life of Ghazali that we have sought to sketch here had as its primary legacy to the Islamic *umma* (as well as that which caused many to regard him as the *mujaddid* of his particular century) the numerous works he wrote. In the same way that we cannot identify him as having been the disciple, the *murid* of any particular master, we do not know that he trained any *murids*; we cannot inscribe him in a *silsilah*, in a chain of



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transmission. We must rather look at his works to see precisely where his contribution lay. They are too numerous to be systematically reviewed; only some will be discussed here, and extracts from others will be presented in translation.

The work easiest of access and that which speaks most plainly about his own development is a brief book called *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, "The Deliverance from Error." This little book has been translated into English as well as a number of other languages. It is extremely illuminating, both because of what it reveals concerning Ghazali's own development and because of his assessment of the different strands of Islamic tradition and the intellectual schools that existed in his age. He begins by pointing out that in early childhood he developed a habit of curiosity concerning the views of all the religious and philosophical groups, non-Muslim as well as Muslim. There were a fair number of Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in Khurasan. Ghazali recalls that whenever he had the opportunity he would investigate



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the beliefs of different groups and attempt to evaluate them. He also draws attention to the well known *hadith* in which the Prophet (s.a.w.s.) refers to all humans as being born in the state of *fitra*, the primordial purity which inclines them to the submission to Allah which is the very essence of Islam. And then, the *hadith* continues, it is their fathers, their mothers, their parents who make of them Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians; in other words, who inculcate in them a religious teaching other than Islam, something that causes them to deviate from the original *fitra*. In other words, the *hadith* suggests that at least for the early part of the life of an individual, environmental influences may supplant or distort that inclination towards Islam which is inherent in all humans.

Ghazali realized, however, that the import of this *hadith* in a way concerns Muslims as well. For the particular understanding of Islam that is inculcated in the individual who is born into a Muslim family must also count as an environmental influence, as something that comes to him from the outside, and it may or may not



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correspond to that *fitra* which is contained in him. So then the necessity arises (or at least it arose for Ghazali) of determining what constitutes certainty in matters of religion and how it is to be attained.

He then departs somewhat from the autobiographical mode to examine the various categories of evidence available for attaining the truth. He deals first with sense perception which is clearly fallible when unaided, because a distant object that is extremely large like the sun may appear very small to us, much smaller than an object which is near at hand, while it in fact is infinitely smaller than the sun. After thus easily dealing with the fallibility of sense perception he proceeds to examine the claims of reason and establishes that reason, although superior to sense perception, is also fallible for it is possible for two individuals, both of them intelligent, to reach, on the basis of reason alone, differing conclusions concerning a single problem. Moreover, in the case even of a single individual, what appears to him reasonable and convincing today may appear



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to him tomorrow defective and unacceptable. Reason therefore must be dismissed as an infallible guide.

Ghazali next proceeds to review the various currents of thought that claimed certainty in the Muslim society of his time. He takes under consideration the philosophers whom he subclassifies into three groups: the Dahriyun who proclaim the eternity of the universe, that is without denying the existence of God, they in effect deny His unity by proclaiming something co-eternal with Him, namely the universe itself; the Tabi'iyyun, the Naturalists, those who again accept the existence of God but reject the existence of the soul as anything other than an epiphenomenon of the body, which dies together with the body on which it depends for existence; and finally, the Ilahiyun, the Theists who are those philosophers who while loyal to the Greek philosophers also attempt to uphold the teachings of the Qur'an, thereby creating a bridge between philosophy and revelation. It is to these that he devotes his greatest attention, not so much in the framework of the



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“Deliverance” as in the framework of the separate book referred to above.

Then he turns also to the theologians, the exponents of *kalam*, the same subject that he had mastered at an early age and on which he had been a brilliant lecturer in Baghdad. He points out that *kalam* in its way is all well and good in that it is nothing other than the exposition in rationally defensible form of the essential teachings of religion. However, he points out that it necessarily falls short of bestowing absolute certainty, in that the mind may embrace the correctness of the proofs advanced by *kalam*, but those proofs may still not penetrate the entire being of a man in such a way that they will determine the nature of his existence.

He also examines the Isma‘ilis to whom, by the way, he does not refer as such. In the language of his time he calls them the people of *ta‘lim*, of authoritative instruction. The Isma‘ilis taught that religious certainty is to be had by unquestioning submission to the authority of an *imam* who had a unique and authoritative access to the inward



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teachings of religion. To the refutation of the Isma'ilis also Ghazali devoted a separate treatise which it is not necessary for us to examine in detail. Enough to say that his refutation of Isma'ilism takes place on two grounds: one, there is nothing logically compelling about the Isma'ili position, the unsupported claim that a given individual has unique authority vested in him does not immediately recommend itself to the intellect; and two, there is nothing in the Qur'an or the Sunna that points in that direction.

Finally Ghazali comes to the Sufis whom he identifies as those who have found the path to the attainment of absolute certainty. They are those who while building on the knowledge available to the intellect purify the mirror of their heart in such a way that the truths of religion are directly reflected in it. In discussing the Sufis he pays some attention to those among them such as al-Hallaj who had brought Sufism into some disrepute with their ecstatic utterances that at least outwardly appeared to be in contradiction with fundamental teachings of Islam; as for example,



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the saying of al-Hallaj, "*ana al-baqq*", "I am the Truth, the Reality." This was condemned by Ghazali as liable to cause popular commotion and error but also defended by him as an authentic statement by al-Hallaj of the spiritual experience that he underwent. Ghazali makes simultaneously a social criticism of the ecstatic Sufi and a defense of the reality of the experience.

This then is the scheme established by al-Ghazali in *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, a movement in the direction of Sufism as the sole path capable of leading to certainty, the direct perception of the truths of religion. It is important to realize that when one speaks of Sufism in this absolute and positive fashion that the authentic *tasawwuf* of which Ghazali was the exponent should not be confused either with the ecstatic statements of people like al-Hallaj or with the perversions to which Sufism has more recently become subject. For Ghazali, as we can see, *tasawwuf* is something that grows directly out of an immersion in the Qur'an and in the Sunna and does not in any way displace adherence to the Shari'a. On the con-



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trary, it is in itself a form of deeper loyalty and adherence to the Shari'a. This we will explain in more detail when we come to speak of one of his other works.

After this survey of *al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*, to which we can accord primacy as a semi-autobiographical work and as a judgement on the principal religious tendencies of the day, let us turn to one of Ghazali's earlier works, the work in the refutation of philosophy. It is a difficult and complex work to appreciate, without presenting the positions of the Greek-influenced philosophers whom Ghazali was engaged in refuting.

Ghazali takes issue with twenty points of the Greek-influenced philosophers. There are two that we can select for review. First, the notion of emanation, that is to say the belief that beings other than Allah emerged from Him in almost mechanistic or determined fashion; that from the divine essence arose a series of intelligences each of which gave rise to the following. In answering this assertion of the Greek-influenced philosophers, Ghazali advances two sets of arguments.



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The first, which is decisive for him, is that this notion has no correlate in the teachings of the Qur'an or the Sunna. Indeed it is clearly irreconcilable with the teachings of the Qur'an concerning creation, which is essentially an exercise of will on the part of Allah creating levels of being external to Himself. This contrasts to the gradual, semi-automatic emergence of things in an indeterminate fashion from within His own essence as propounded by the philosophers. Second, Ghazali points out that, in terms of the premises of philosophy itself, the whole notion of emanationism is still condemned, because there is nothing logically compelling about it nor does it correspond to anything that is observable in the external world.

The second particular point to which we may draw attention in Ghazali's refutation of the philosophers relates to God's knowledge of creation. The scheme of emanations tends to create as it were a barrier between God and His creation, instead of the immediacy established by the exercise



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of divine will. Similarly, the philosophers maintained that God has knowledge only of universal categories, and of their individual members, thereby subverting the further form of divine intimacy with creation established by His knowledge of particulars. This position too was refuted by Ghazali in the same twofold fashion. He emphasized that God has knowledge not merely of universal categories but also of everything concerning each individual member of each category. He formulated the matter by saying that if an ant moves across a rock in the middle of the night then God is aware of it.

A response to the *Tabafut al-Falasifa* was written by Ibn Rushd in Muslim Spain; it received some approbation. But generally speaking the Hellenistic philosophers left little trace on Sunni thought. This fact has given rise to some questionable assessments played by Ghazali in Islamic intellectual history. It is asserted, for example, that things began to go wrong in Islamic history when Ghazali banished philosophy from the



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Muslim agenda, so that Muslims fell helplessly prey to all kinds of intellectual stagnation.

There is much to be said concerning the fallacy of this theory. First of all, a tradition cannot stagnate for several hundred years. If such a blow to its vitality had been dealt already in the eleventh or twelfth century, Islamic civilization as such would not merely have come to a halt, it would have disappeared. Second, intellectual activity is not to be regarded as coterminous with philosophy. On the contrary, there is a great deal of intellectual activity of a high order that continued to take place in the Islamic world in a form appropriate to Islam after the discrediting of philosophy by Ghazali. Third, it can be said that no one individual is capable singlehandedly of determining the intellectual destiny of his society and culture in his own lifetime, let alone for centuries thereafter. Far from being a death blow we have to see in Ghazali's refutation of philosophy one dimension of his greatness: he demonstrated the incompatibility with Islam of a form of thought that was alien to its precepts but



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had begun to infect a certain area of the Muslim intellect.

The major work of Ghazali, the bedrock of his legacy, is the great work called *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, which one may translate as "The Revival" or "Revivification of the Sciences of Religion." With some exaggeration it has been said of this book that if all of the rest of Islamic literature, other of course than Qur'an and *hadith*, were lost, then one would be able to gain a fairly accurate and comprehensive idea of Islam from a perusal of this book. This may be a somewhat exaggerated estimate but it is certain that for anyone wishing to acquire a comprehensive understanding of Sunni Islam as elaborated and formulated in the period down to the end of Ghazali's life then *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* is the work to consult. *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* is a combination of a number of different sciences. In other words, it has within it a dimension of *kalam*, of the organized statement of doctrine. It is also a book of *hadith* in that throughout the sources of authority, after the



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Qur'an, are primarily the *hadith*. It is a book of *fiqh* in that the organization of its topics, whenever appropriate, correspond to the topics of Islamic law. It is also a book of ethics in that it contains chapters concerning the acts and states which lead man to perdition or salvation. It is also, while being all of these, at the very same time a book of Sufism in the best sense, for it is a book pointing the way to the purification of the individual and his leading a life of devotion which will lead him to a direct perception of divine realities. In the composition of *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din*, Ghazali had one precedent to follow, the book called *Qut al-Qulub* by Abu Talib al-Makki, in which the topics of *fiqh* and Sufi or moral concern are combined in a similar fashion.

The method followed by Ghazali in the *Ihya'* is to expound any given matter first from the viewpoint of *fiqh* and then from the viewpoint of Sufism. If one looks, for example, at the chapters on prayer one will see that Ghazali first establishes what is the necessity of prayer and what constitute the necessary conditions for the va-



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lidity of prayer in terms of *fiqh*. Then he proceeds to establish the inward dimensions of prayer. This he does by referring to three classes of men. Those whom he calls the *'awamm*, the common mass of people, the *khawass*, the elite and the *khawass al-khawass*, the elite among the elite. These terms should not be understood in a sociological sense; they are not to be correlated with degrees of prominence in society. It is entirely possible for a king to be one of the *'awamm* and for a simple shepherd to be one of the *khawass al-khawass*. It is a question of three levels of spiritual capacity and attainment, in accordance with which the prayer takes on a different level or aspect. The same threefold principle is applied by Ghazali to all the forms of ritual worship, whether it be *salat*, *zakat*, *hajj*, or *saum*. This alone lends Ghazali's book great value and importance.

The book *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* is also significant in that for many centuries it has remained the object of continuous study among Muslims. Many books written in the early period, particularly books of Sufism, were forgotten by later genera-



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tions. They were either superseded or copies of them, for whatever reason, became scarce and they fell out of circulation. The book of al-Ghazali, by contrast, has been continuously studied. It is also interesting to note that despite the clear affiliation of Ghazali with Sunni Islam, *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* also found some echo in the Shi'i world, for in the eleventh/seventeenth century an Iranian scholar, Mulla Fayz Muhsin Kashani, rewrote the work, substituting for the *badith* which Ghazali took from Sunni sources corresponding *badith* taken from Shi'i sources. The fact that he was able to do this means, of course, that the wide range of religious concerns with which Ghazali deals in *Ihya' Ulum al-Din* can be authenticated in terms either of Sunni or Shi'i *badith*. This is one indication among many others that the substance of Islam can find compatible expression in both Sunni and Shi'i forms. *Ihya' 'Ulum al-Din* has also been translated into a number of languages, another important indication of its lasting appeal. He himself prepared a kind of abbreviated version in Persian under the title



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Kimiya-yi Sa'adat. When the scholars from the Malay-Indonesian world began to come and study in Haramayn many of his works including the *Ihya'* were translated into the Malay-Indonesian language, becoming fundamental textbooks of religion in that region.

One final remark concerning the *Ihya'* *'Ulum al-Din*. It is said that by virtue of this book, and in general by virtue of his attitude towards *tasawwuf*, Ghazali "reconciled Sufism with Islamic orthodoxy." This is a statement that one finds made continuously both by Muslims and by non-Muslims. It is open to objection on a variety of scores. Does the word "orthodoxy" have any validity in an Islamic context? It is certainly not a word which should be used to confer unique authority upon one's own understanding of Islam, or to any particular understanding of Islam to which one is heir. But apart from that, if one takes "orthodoxy" in the sense of being Qur'an and Sunna, or the religion that has its outward manifestation in the Shari'a, Sufism from the very beginning has always been utterly compatible



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with the Shari'a. It is even one can say, an essential outgrowth of the Shari'a, for there is no *tasawwuf* without Shari'a and the Shari'a contains within itself in implicit form the contents also of *tasawwuf*. There is therefore no real duality, let alone a contradiction that needed to be resolved whether by Ghazali or by anyone else. The complementarity of *tasawwuf* with the Shari'a had already been manifested by writers earlier than Ghazali, not only al-Makki but Qushayri, Kalabadhi, and others. What would be true to say is that Ghazali demonstrated in greater detail than any previous writer the essential complementarity of these two dimensions of Islam—the inward dimension to which we conventionally refer as the *tariqa* or *tasawwuf* and the outer dimension that is the Shari'a.

Although in recent centuries it has become very frequent for the Muslims to question *tasawwuf*, sometimes for good reason given the recent manifestations of what passes for *tasawwuf*, it should be understood that for many centuries



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tasawwuf was an integral part of the belief and the practice of Ahl al-Sunna wa al-Jama'a and it is for this reason among others that we can designate Ghazali as being himself an exemplar of the classical Sunni scheme. He mastered *kalam* but recognized its limitations; he refuted and placed on the edge of the Muslim consciousness the alien traditions of Greek philosophy; he mastered and fully integrated into his life the injunctions of the Shari'a and beyond that, as the pinnacle of religious perception and experience, he also traversed the path of the Sufis. Both in his writings and his life, he showed the interrelation of all of these aspects and dimensions.

It is not that Ghazali represents a pinnacle after which all else declined. In general, when we assess our history, it is unadvisable to think in these simplistic terms of rise and decline, of periods of flourishing and decay. What is certain is that Ghazali was one of those great individuals in the history of Islam whose writings and lives help us



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to orient ourselves in conditions which in some ways are very different from theirs, but in others very close to them.

Extracts from the Writings of Ghazali

From *Al-Munqidh min al-Dalal*

Then, when I had completed my examination of those sciences [the forms of knowledge professed by other groups and sects] I turned my attention to the path of the Sufis, and came to understand that the perfection of their method lies in a combination of knowledge and deed. It is their knowledge that enables them to traverse the obstacles placed in their way by the instinctual soul, to purify themselves of its reprehensible characteristics and lowly attributes, and thereby to empty the heart of other-than-Allah and adorn



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it with His remembrance. The acquisition of this knowledge was easier for me than acting in accordance with it, so I began by studying their books such as the *Qut al-Qulub* of Abu Talib al-Makki, the writings of al-Harith al-Muhasibi, and the various fragments and utterances attributed to al-Junaid, ash-Shibli, Abu Yazid al-Bistami, and others. I comprehended the essence of their sciences and acquired whatever knowledge could be had of their path by means of study and instruction. It was, however, apparent to me that which truly distinguishes the Sufis can be attained only by direct experience, spiritual state and the transformation of one's attributes, not by study. . . . How great is the difference between knowing the definition of drunkenness—that it consists of a state resulting from the rise of vapors in the stomach to the sources of thought—and being actually drunk. The drunken know nothing of the definition of drunkenness as long as they are drunk; it is only the sober who know the definition of drunkenness, a state in which they have no share.



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. . . I thus became convinced that the Sufis are people characterized by states, not by utterances.

From *Al-Maqsad al-Asna fi Sharh Ma'ani Asma' Allah al-Husna*, an examination of the "Most Beautiful Names" of Allah

The All-Hearing (al-samî'): He from Whose awareness no audible thing is removed, however hidden it may be. He hears all secret and intimate discourse, and all that may be still more subtle and hidden, just as He is aware of the black ant that crawls across sheer rock in the darkness of the night. He hears the praise of those who praise Him, and He rewards them; He hears the supplications of those who call upon Him, and He answers them. He hears without ear or eardrum, just as He acts without limb and speaks without tongue. His hearing is not in any way subject to temporality. Once you have realized this, that *the All-Hearing* is exempt from change resulting when audible things occur in time, and become



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aware that in His transcendence He hears without any ear, instrument or tool, you will further understand that hearing, with respect to Him, consists of an attribute whereby the attributes of audible things become manifest in their perfection. Whoever does not exert care in this matter will inevitably fall into pure anthropomorphism; beware of such a person and watch him carefully.

Man, of course, with respect to his senses, has some share of hearing, but it is deficient. For he cannot sense all audible things, but only sounds that are near him. Moreover, his hearing takes place by means of an instrument, his ear, which is subject to damage. If the sound is muffled, he cannot fully hear it, and if it is distant, he cannot hear it at all. If the sound is of great volume, it may even destroy his hearing and cause it to disappear.

The spiritual benefit to be derived from the foregoing is twofold. First, one should know that Allah, Almighty and Glorious, is All-Hearing, and he will accordingly guard his tongue. Second, he should know that hearing has been created in man only so that he might hear the word of Allah, the



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Book He has sent down, and profit from its guidance in order to advance on the path to Him, Almighty and Glorious. For no other purpose should hearing be used.

From *Ihya' 'Ulum ad-Din*

Know that the inner qualities which bestow vitality on prayer are essentially six: presence of the heart; understanding; reverence; awe; hope; and shame. As for the first, we mean by it that the worshipper should empty his heart of everything apart from his immediate concern and the words he is uttering; he should be fully aware of what he is doing and saying and not allow his thoughts to wander freely. To the degree that he is able to avoid thinking of anything apart from the prayer and to establish awareness of it in his heart with no trace of neglectfulness, he will succeed in attaining presence of the heart. Understanding the meaning of the words one utters is distinct from presence of the heart, for it is possible that presence of the heart be accom-



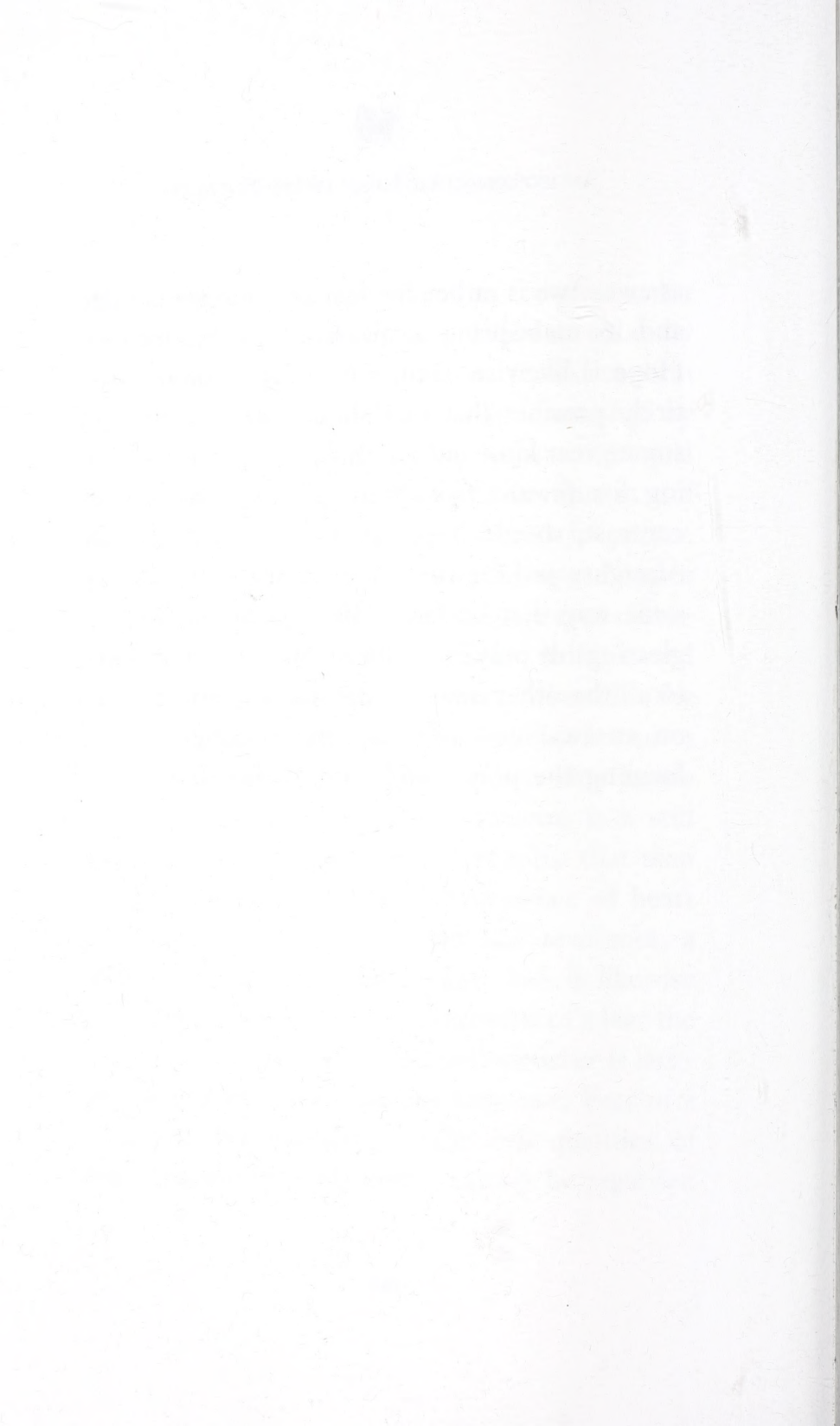
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panied only by the words used in the prayer, not by the meaning of those words. What we mean by "understanding" is that the heart should contain the meaning as well. This is a station attained by people in different degrees, for they are not equal in understanding the meanings of the Qur'an and the formulae of glorification uttered in prayer. How often it happens that the worshipper comes to understand in the course of his prayer meanings that had never before occurred to his heart! It is for this reason that the prayer dissuades the worshipper from evil and abomination: it causes him to understand certain meanings that firmly prevent him from sinning. Reverence is a still more advanced stage, for it is possible that man should address his Lord with presence of heart and understanding but should lack reverence, a distinct quality in its own right. Awe is likewise additional to reverence, for it consists of a fear the origin of which is reverence, and whoever is lacking in fear cannot be said to have awe. Fear of a scorpion, for example, or the evil qualities of some person or lowly entity, cannot be regarded



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as awe. Awe is rather the fear of some great ruler, and its mainspring is awareness of his majesty. Hope is likewise distinct from awe, for it is entirely possible that one should stand in awe of some great king and fear his power without hoping for reward from him. The worshipper, by contrast, should hope for a reward from Allah, Almighty and Glorious, for his prayer, in just the same way that he fears His punishment for neglecting his prayer. As for shame, it is additional to all the other qualities discussed, for it is based on an awareness of one's shortcomings in performing the prayer and an apprehension of sin.



Chronology of Ghazali's Era

- 455/1063 Alp Arslan becomes ruler of the Seljuq realm
- 457/1065 Nizam al-Mulk becomes vizier to the Seljuqs
- 459/1067 Foundation of the Nizamiya *madrasa* in Baghdad
- 463/1071 Seljuq victory at Malazgirt; beginning of Turkish rule in Anatolia
- 465/1072 Malikshah succeeds to the Seljuq throne



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- 467/1075 al-Muqtadi succeeds to the 'Abbasid caliphate
- 477/1084 Death of Abu 'Ali Farmadi
- 478/1085 Death of Imam al-Haramayn Juvayni
- 483/1090–518/1124 Hasan-i Sabbah directs Isma'ili activities from his stronghold in Alamut
- 485/1092 Nizam al-Mulk assassinated by Isma'ilis
- 487/1094 Berkiyaruq becomes Seljuq ruler; al-Mustazhir succeeds to the 'Abbasid caliphate
- 493/1099 The Crusaders occupy Jerusalem
- 498/1105 Death of Berkiyaruq and dispute over the Seljuq succession
- 500/1106 Beginning of the sixth century of the Islamic era

Chronology of Ghazali's life

- 450/1058 Born near Tus
- 453/1061 Birth of his younger brother, Ahmad Ghazali
- 465/1072 Beginning of his education, first in his birthplace then, for five years, in Jurjan
- c.471/1078 Beginning of his first residence in Nishapur
- 484/1091 Appointed to the Nizamiya *madrassa* in Baghdad



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- 488/1095 Quits his post in Baghdad as result of
a spiritual crisis
- 488/1095–490/1097 Period of travel, pilgrimage
and seclusion, spent in the Hijaz,
Syria, and Palestine
- Dhu'l-Qa'da 499/July 1106 Return to Nishapur
to teach briefly before settling once
more in Tus
- Jumada II 14, 505/December 19, 1111 Dies in
Tus

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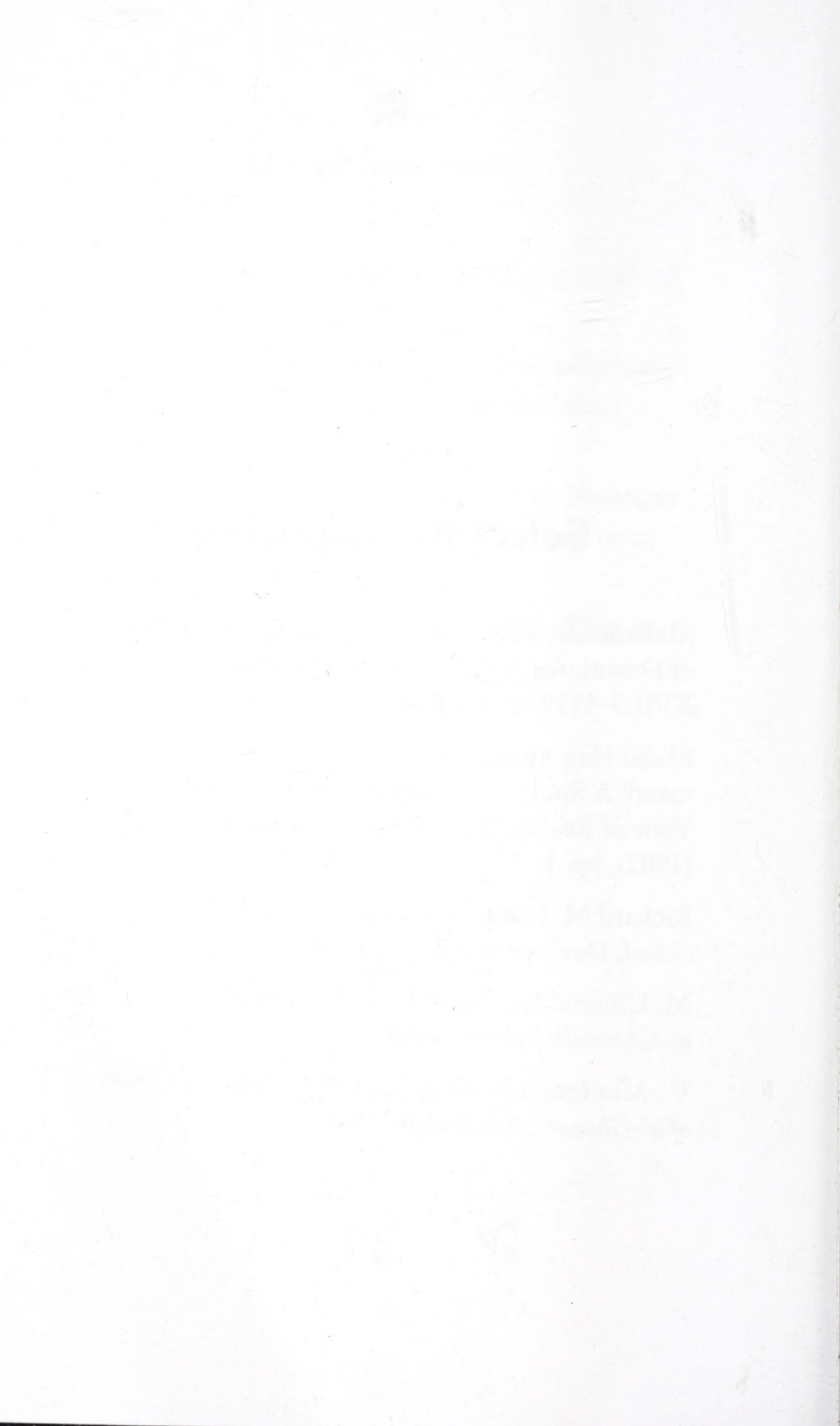
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Hamid Algar, born in England in 1940, received his formal training in Islamic studies at Cambridge University, from which he received his Ph.D. in 1965. Since 1965, he has been teaching at the University of California, Berkeley, a wide range of courses including tafsir, Sufism, Shi'ism, the history of Islam in Iran, Arabic, Persian and Turkish literature.

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